

Are we different?

McCabe, Allister; Phillimore, Jennifer

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Chapter 3

Are we different? Claims for distinctiveness in voluntary and community action

Angus McCabe and Jenny Phillimore

Chapter aims

Drawing on 126 interviews with community activists, this chapter critically examines:

- How and why community groups come into existence and are sustained
- Whether claims for the distinctiveness of community groups and activities is justified
- The function of social networks in community action.

Background

The literature on the voluntary and community sector is littered with claims of its distinctiveness – if not uniqueness. Unlike the private sector, voluntaries are not motivated by profit. Whereas the statutory sector is bureaucratic, and accordingly slow to act, voluntary organisations are fleet of foot, adaptable and responsive. The sector is, at least in principle, value driven (Corry 2011), guided by concepts of cooperation and solidarity (Warren 2001) and working for community cohesion and strengthening local networks of care (Edwards 2008).

Debate on the distinctiveness of the sector, has, however, shifted in the last decade, as has the language used to describe the sector: from the generic ‘voluntary organisations’ to the idea of a voluntary, then third, sector and on into a more amorphous concept of civil society. At the same time, the idea that the sector exists as a cohesive whole has been called into question as:

‘Internal diversity has been incorporated into the presentation of a sector constructed with a breadth and profile to stand alongside, and even to challenge, the public and private sectors.... [However] different agendas mean that the notion of a third sector is inevitably a contested one, and may lead some to challenge the relevance of the concept itself’. (Alcock 2010 p1 and 4).

Billis (2010) goes further and argues that (at least some) voluntary and community organisations have moved towards more hybrid modes of operation: espousing the values of voluntarism whilst becoming more bureaucratic or business like. Further, following the recession and subsequent

austerity measures and cuts to public funding implemented from 2008, there are those who argue that the core values which may have been used to define the sector's distinctiveness have been eroded and that there are now (at least) two different sectors, divided between the haves (large charities) and the have nots (community groups). An argument has been made that larger charities have to some extent been co-opted by the state – with an accompanying loss of autonomy, independence, pluralism and 'ungoverned spaces' that are important to citizens:

'Voluntary services exist to do the things that Government cannot, will not, or should not do; to complement, not substitute for public services and entitlements: to innovate, reach excluded groups, aid access to mainstream services, offer services which have to be independent (such as advice and advocacy) and act as commentator and critic of public services and State action. Once a voluntary group becomes a servant of the State this unique role is compromised.'

(NCIA 2015 p1)

The classic definitions of the voluntary sector remain in place - formality, independence, non-profit distribution and voluntarism (Salamon and Anheier 1997). However, perhaps, as Kenny et al (2015) argue it is time for voluntary and community organisations to question their role, function and the 'easy' claims made by the sector for itself: of solidarity and a commitment to equalities and social justice. What 'the sector' looks like, or perhaps more importantly 'feels' like is, therefore, increasingly contested and controversial (see Crowley, chapter four). Certainly it is a sector 'in transition' (Milbourne 2013). Much of the research looking at motivations has focused upon the "formal" or large scale sector. It is conceivable that below the radar organisations, with their at best tentative connections to the state, will fare differently to larger organisations and retain their independence and autonomy.

This chapter focuses upon the experiences of below the radar voluntary organisation focusing in particular on the 'look' and 'feel' of the BTR part of the sector. It does so, in terms of voluntary sector research, from a longitudinal perspective: drawing on 126 interviews between 2008 and 2015 with community activists, representatives from 'micro' organisations (registered but with incomes of less than £10,000 a year), community anchor and network groups and policy makers. We explore shifts in attitudes over a seven year period to ideas that BTR organisations are a unified and distinctive part of the voluntary sector.

Coming into existence

Perhaps a starting point for examining claims for community groups having distinctive characteristics in terms of voluntary action is to identify why they come into existence; After all, there is no requirement for them to be established in law or statute (NCIA 2015).

A key theme in terms of motivations to establish a BTR group is the importance of emotion – a subject that, as Anderson points out (chapter 11) is sorely neglected in the literature in this field. For some that starting point is raw anger: ‘this is wrong’, ‘this should not be happening to me/my community’. Anger may be generated by planning permissions for large capital projects (witness the campaigns against the high speed rail link between Birmingham and London or against the expansion of Heathrow). Such emotional starting points can (as Conn 2011 has argued) contribute to misunderstandings between statutory agencies and policy makers (stressing the rational in policy making processes and activists).

Our interviews revealed that feelings of loss or absence were also an important factor motivating action. For activists from Black and Minority Ethnic groups, this often commenced when gaps in services were identified because of the state’s perceived failure to meet the needs of marginalised groups. Similarly representatives from Migrant and Refugee Community Organisations involved throughout the research talked about actions occurring to provide mutual aid to new arrivals who were unable to locate that support elsewhere. For several rural groups, the motivation for action was to develop a community shop following the closure of the local shop. Such action proliferated where there were no alternatives ‘*when you have no money, no food or you just have to do something*’ (women’s respondent), particularly in areas that had a history of making things happen and had a culture of risk taking:

‘where there is a ‘crucible; - places with long history of welcoming and bringing people together – around existing institutions that are accepting of risk taking – place to be welcome and not expecting formality, easy going, see what develops, tolerance of low level risks’ (woman activist interview).

A common enemy, whether that was desperation or poverty, campaigning for a living wage or against corporate developers was also seen as a key motivator for activity. Shared anger could be powerful (Lupton 2003, Richardson 2008).

Emotion, as a motivator, was frequently linked to other factors. There may be cultural expectations that individuals must take action and a risk of ‘*huge cultural penalties*’ for refusing

someone in need. Those interviewed from Migrant and Refugee Community organisations repeatedly talked of the importance of to *'look after our own'*, *'putting something back'* by helping people who were going through a similar situation by offering support to *'friends I didn't know....you have to open your door to those in need'*. For others, belief systems came into play. There was an expectation within and across faith communities to provide practical, financial or emotional support for others; especially where the importance of helping those less fortunate than oneself was core to religious texts (Furbey et al 2006, McCabe et al 2016) and therefore a duty.

Individual characteristics, or traits, also played a role in *'getting things going'*. Activists were often described as passionate, charismatic, self-motivated and skilled. A rural respondent argued that having a *'gobby activist'* as part of the group was important. There was also agreement that community action was often gendered (Dominelli 2006): women were most likely to start a small scale activity *'although the higher up the hierarchy you go its men'* (faith respondent).

What, however, bound these motivations for action together after the initial driver for action was the social aspects of action: *'people are group animals and naturally want to come together.'* Indeed, a common theme, across different stakeholders, was the crucial importance of below the radar groups and activities in *'bringing isolated people and communities together'*, *'connecting people'* and *'overcoming isolation'*. In short such groups were acting as *'the social glue'*,

Keeping it going?

'Sustainability' became a buzz word for communities and community activities over the 2000s: both in policy terms and in the academic literature (Raco 2007). Sustaining anger and emotional engagement over long periods is difficult. Further motivations are required and it is to these we now turn.

Not all BTR groups just keep going. Sometimes people come together for a campaign which may be short lived or alternatively last years – but then disperse, either because the campaign was successful or it failed in its desired outcome – the end of the group can be an indicator of success as well as failure. Life cycles of actions varied according to need. Some groups, particularly in the arts thrived for many years, without any perceived need for change. Others arose in response to need, became very active – followed by a period of being dormant – until a new issue or need arose. We were told that many groups depended heavily on just a few individuals. These activists could and did

burn out. The issue the group was seeking to address may not have disappeared, but actions stopped and only re-emerged when new individuals were activated.

Common cause, over time, was important in sustaining focus and action. But in the longer term it was perhaps the social nature of community groups that kept people engaged. Such sociality is an aspect of community life that has often been underplayed in policy and research terms (Taylor 2012): community groups are often considered to be 'amateurish' because they have a focus on process and inter-action rather than drive and being task orientated. Yet such arguments underplay the multi-layered functions of even apparently single purpose groups:

'I'm thinking of another sports club we looked at, was I guess their main activity was providing boxing activities and things like that but they provided general social activities for people – sort of an opportunity to get -together, running all sorts of events, activities to clean up and tidy the venue. I guess they had the sort of common purpose – they were about providing that main activity but all the other activities that contributed to that were incredibly diverse, which then meant that people could come along and dip in however they chose and saw fit really because they do provide quite a broad social function within society at local level'. (Development Agency perspective)

The notion of gaining some kind of pay-back – either in terms of recognition within one's community or through emotional and social support rather than financial reward –that keeps people and the actions they initiate going. Respondents noted that many people leave the groups they are involved in because, after years of commitment, others forgot to thank them.

Are community groups distinctive?

'I describe the totality of the voluntary sector as an ice-berg...it's just trying to get across the idea that most of the community organisations are below the water as in an ice-berg and that has profound implications on how that sector is seen and understood and in terms of relationships of power as well, you can have quite a skewed picture – because the bit below the water is not recognised in terms of voice, in terms of policy or even research proposals'. (Community Activist interview)

As noted in Chapter One, quantitatively, the majority of the voluntary, or third, sector is unregistered, in the form of what are commonly described as below the radar, groups. Throughout

the seven years of below the radar research to date, the over-whelming argument made by participants was that BTR actions are distinctive for a variety of reasons.

A key argument was that there were blurred boundaries between the personal and civic lives of actors and activists *'It's completely their life...they never clock off'* (Development Agency interview) while formal organisations were professionalised – the employed people whose actions occurred because they were paid to undertake them. In BTR organisation activities tend to be social action based. Below the radar activists were said to take risks that 'professional' organisations would not consider. They were apparently not tied to any specific ways of working by having contracts to deliver and instead were free to lobby as they see fit. They were driven by political, social, cultural or faith values rather than financial reward. Participants argued that these drivers enabled actions driven from the grassroots to be innovative.

Respondents argued that the level of small scale community actions was frequently underestimated and unrecognised either by policy makers or more formal institutions and charities:

'What we know about these groups in terms of formal lists actually bears no resemblance to the levels of activity within groups. There tends to be the groups everyone knows about and then invisible groups. Its those invisible groups that (names area) were perhaps the most active in their community – but were unknown beyond it.' (Network Organisation perspective).

Or, as another activist expressed it: *'never mistake the level of formality with the actual level of activity'*.

Below the radar groups were argued to be embedded within their communities. They are said to be well-networked and able to reach people in need by working in a highly localised way with specialised local or community of interest knowledge : *'Small organisations are the closest to community – they can alert policy makers to issues before they become problem 'you know issue is coming'* (Policy level interview). Such organisations were said to often possess experiential knowledge, being led by communities for communities, with sufficient trust and respect to be able to address the most sensitive of issues including child abuse and domestic violence. They did not stigmatise participants because of poverty or disability, because all those involved *'are in the same boat, in the case of refugees, literally'* (Faith based organisation interview).

Respondents argued BTR groups were more fluid, flexible and informal than the mainstream sector. Without a formal structure and constitution they could quickly adapt to needs as they emerged.

'They are uninhibited by bureaucracy, able to act immediately without the need for formalised meetings – as a result the rules are different [and] not mediated by money exchange'. (woman respondent). Representatives from national network organisations also noted lack of formal structures, often viewed by Government as a deficit which needed to be remedied, as a potential strength, whilst adding a note of caution: 'if you are below the radar and there is no-one on the outside looking in how do you know what you are doing is okay? Where are the 'checks and balances' in small, fairly informal, groups? They address specific needs for specific groups that the mainstream does not see or does not acknowledge' (network organisation . 'interview)

The informality of below the radar groups was seen as one of the features making them different from formal organisations. Formal organisations had rules and tightly defined hierarchies while their concept of a 'volunteer' differed from that in BTR voluntary organisations. For example: *'volunteer-management within these groups is very informal, very active, responds to what people want, little chats- it doesn't have the levels of bureaucracy that a lot of formal volunteering seems to have and people felt quite strongly when we talked to them that if a formal volunteer management system was imposed upon these sorts of groups it would kill those groups.'* (Voluntary Sector Council interview).

Without a formal structure and constitution BTR groups could adapt to needs as they emerged. *'They are uninhibited by bureaucracy, able to act immediately without the need for formalised meetings – as a result the rules are different [and] not mediated by money exchange'. (Women's Group respondent). Other respondents, representatives from national network organisations, noted the lack of formal structures as a potential strength, whilst adding a note of caution: 'if you are below the radar and there is no-one on the outside looking in how do you know what you are doing is okay? Where are the 'checks and balances' in small, fairly informal, groups?'*

A further argument for the distinctiveness of BTR activity concerned the way they dealt with needs holistically. Women's, Black and Minority Ethnic and new community organisations were considered to offer support and solutions to complex needs in a totally different manner to state institutions; they were highly personalised and responsive and acted on immediate needs rather than eligibility criteria: *'They create genuine personal connections on a level that is appropriate. A person to person connection that big agencies just cannot do'. (Rural Group interview)*

Small scale community activities were said to 'breed' a culture of self-reliance and mutual support. They relied heavily on volunteers and were cost effective because they paid no salaries. Groups were

often self-funded and accessed resources (not only in affluent areas) from within their communities which offered additional flexibilities:

'You are not dictated to by anyone external; you can do what you want to do within the resources that you have. You are more likely to meet needs in an effective way. You are free to say what you want, independent and not tied to any funding, funder or project delivery targets' (Women's Group respondent).

Their goals varied including taking on assets, such as the community shop or building a community centre/village hall or managing a facility (for example older people's day care) linked to a faith building. For example a Sudanese group in one area combined limited resources to cover the costs of a flight home for a community member who was struggling to survive in the UK. In another instance a small Pakistani group interviewed raised £20,000 from within their own community to build a school in Pakistan.

The limitations of distinctiveness

While many arguments were made by respondents regarding the distinctiveness and associated efficacy of BTR groups. Participants were reflective and sometimes self-critical or indicating that they were aware of the limitations of below the radar actions. Some respondents critiqued the concept of 'below the radar' and its use to describe small scale community actions. For other research participants the term had value. Below the radar as an idea was said to relate to how it 'felt' to be engaged in such activities: *'[the term] does say something that is a truth. There's a whole mess of vibrant life going on that's not recognised'*. For others, however, the phrase was *'unhelpful as it presented a deficit model'* which implied that community activity remained 'below the radar' because groups lacked the capacity to grow and develop. Other interviewees found the term actually disempowering, because of that implied failure on the part of activities or groups and was using the *'wrong lens'* (as a research imposed term) to understand small scale community activity as; *'they are not below the radar but the heart and soul of the sector'* (Development Agency) and *'may be invisible to some, but are highly visible where it matters, in their own communities'* (Community Activist interview)

Whilst, then, the term itself was contested (Phillimore *et al* 2009), there was agreement around the challenges facing, and limitations of, below the radar activities. Access to resources was a key issue. Without finance, however generated (either through grants or monies raised from within the community) many small groups were acutely aware that they lacked a capacity to respond to increasing needs within their community (McCabe *et al* 2016). Further, whilst much of the recent literature has focused on the impact of financial cuts (NCIA 2015, Milbourne 2013) access to other resources which may themselves be in short supply were crucial to small groups.

Many groups were dependent on some kind of social space, often tapping in to physical resources like a school, library or local authority community centre to run their activities. Whereas, at the start of the research in 2008, this was a relatively easy process, by 2012 groups were reporting increasing difficulties in finding spaces to meet that were affordable (no or low cost) as such spaces had closed or moved to charging commercial rental rates as an income generating strategy for their own survival.

People also used networking skills or '*social capital*', rather than external '*financial capital*' (e.g. grants/contracts) to access the knowledge or resources they needed to make something happen. Interviewees stressed the importance of:

'Resources beyond the purely financial': 'in terms of people and resources, I think there's an awful lot of barter, there's an awful lot of gift exchange goes on. I think the goodwill of friends and family and community accounts for an awful lot in keeping these places (community centres/village halls) running in practice. I mean I don't think their balance sheets represent, you know, the true value of what gets put into them, what gets generated by them'.

Yet again, reflecting on recent experiences, below the radar groups reported, consistently, difficulties in recruiting and retaining activists and volunteers. In austere times, people were increasingly living in uncertain circumstance, with insecure jobs and low pay which meant taking on several jobs to survive. In this environment despite the will to participate, people lacked the resources – either financially or in terms of time.

The potential, or real, limitations of below the radar activity went beyond financial issues. The rhetoric of distinctiveness included the idea that community groups had horizontal, highly participatory and democratic decision making processes. However, they could be driven by autocratic individuals. While community groups are sometimes portrayed as inclusive, some were in

fact highly exclusive – along the lines of race or gender exclusion. Then, there was an issue concerning:

‘Who participates? Well there is an issue of inclusivity. (Arts) groups can appear to be exclusive because they come together around a shared interest – so obviously they become groups of like minded people...There is an issue of insularity in lots of small groups. This may not be deliberate but they can create accidental barriers which exclude others’ (Voluntary Arts Group interview)

Participation was linked, by research participants to ideas of accountability. To some the simple fact that people voted with their feet *‘if people do not knock at your door you are not good enough’* (Migrant and Refugee Community Organisation respondent) was sufficient accountability. Further, formal constituted structures did not necessarily evidence accountability as leaders often put friends or family on the board. Uneven power relations, often related to the time dedicated to an issue rather than formal status, meant that some individuals pursued their agenda regardless of the needs of their communities or formal decision making processes. Accountability very much depended on the quality and vision of leadership. Below the radar groups could be genuinely member led and, without a formal constitution, were only answerable to themselves rather than a wider community constituency.

Finally, there issues of power and influence were raised by respondents. The *‘involvement of communities’* and local groups in decision making was seen by most interviewees as largely tokenistic:

‘When small groups are asked to have an input to policy it never gets beyond consultation. It is not a two way process...there is a lack of education around the policy process and understanding that process...also a reliance on external people gathering community views – rather than the community itself. And the balance of power in policy processes makes it very difficult for communities to influence professional services.’(Community Activist interview)

Sometimes lack of accountability meant that groups failed to adapt to meet the needs of those who they were meant to serve. Power struggles and associated fracturing sometimes led groups to lose their way and to cease providing for their communities. At a personal level, there was the risk of *‘burn out’* when small numbers of people became *‘over-committed or overstretched’* in their community activities. development agency representatives talked of the *‘stresses and strains’* of

being involved at a community level in regeneration initiatives *'the real risks to health, mental health and relationships'* : *'People can destroy their own lives by taking on responsibility for their community. Especially in communities that face a high level of chaos'*. (Community Activist interviews)

Lack of emotional support and opportunities for 'time out' for activists was seen as a neglected element of both research and community orientated policy (from neighbourhood renewal through to localism) and is explored in more depth in chapter 11.

A hardening of attitudes?

Looking back to 2008 and the early phase of Third Sector Research Centre below the radar research, a majority of community groups involved saw themselves as part of an admittedly *'loose and baggy'* sector (Kendall and Knapp 1996). There was however a perceived continuum between small community groups and large charities that related to values rather than financial resources or modes of operating:

'The value and uniqueness of the sector is rooted in its own values....which include, at their best, enabling those furthest from power to have a voice; understanding the needs of, and reaching those missed by, mainstream services.' (Guardian Q and A Live Discussion – cited McCabe 2013 p39):

Post-2010 a pattern emerged across the below the radar interviews of 'them' and 'us': the formal voluntary sector versus the community sector:

'What the sector is about is social justice, that is what it is about, but actually I think a lot of the sector has forgotten that in a meaningful way; I think everyone can sign up to it in a superficial way in terms of values and mission statements and shiny documents... but I'm not sure that a lot of the professionalised voluntary sector is about a direct engagement with people that changes their lives and accords to principles of social justice, I think it's about getting some money that provides some services that may or may not impact on people's lives in a hopefully social just way – it's a lot more distanced' (Community Activist interview)

Some respondents thought that larger voluntaries and, in particular, charities had 'lost their way', both in terms of their connectedness with communities or service users and their values:

'All organisations start with a passion – big organisations often lose sight of values – it's easier to hold out for your values when unfunded – you do what you want to do. So there is a lack of [having to] compromise'. (Black and Minority Ethnic group interview)

Allied to this feeling of a divided, bi-lateral, 'sector', was a sense of resentment around the roles small community groups were now expected to play by policymakers (i.e. taking on increasing responsibilities for assets and services) combined with pressures bubbling up from local residents for them to meet needs. For example, the development, and proliferation of community based, foodbanks was seen by some as evidence of a distinctive sector – able to respond quickly to emerging needs. Others asked – why foodbanks in the world's fifth richest economy? (McCabe et al 2016). For all the political rhetoric, communities and community groups felt they were being abandoned.

'The real issue is that politicians, agencies, talk about communities and community services. But the agencies, the politicians are not in there working at the community level. It's the far right in England – Sinn Fein and the paramilitaries in Northern Ireland. It's them who are taking over the community agenda – because they are in there'. (Community activist interview)

Community action was often seen as a '*postcode lottery*', and groups had been forced into had a '*focus on fire-fighting rather than change*'. The state was perceived as favouring community based action as a solution to lack of resources and as a '*cheaper option*' in tackling social problems '*we have lost our way as a society and are looking at (community) organisations as salvation*' (Black and Minority Ethnic group respondent). Rural interviewees commented that community groups were increasingly '*filling the gaps left when statutory services withdraw from (rural) areas*'. However, relying on small groups to improve local relations was '*a band aid for haemorrhages*' (Faith group respondent), that could only be solved through strategic action.

Some below the radar activities and organisations did aspire to grow. Respondents felt that groups such as the Trussell Trust, the Strangers into Citizens Campaign to regularise undocumented migrants and responses to domestic violence had emerged from micro-level grassroots activity. However, most of those community based organisations interviewed, even when facing increasing demand for their services, had resisted the pressure to grow (or '*scale up*'; Coutu 2014)) and become formalised. Some groups were thought to be successful because they were small. Respondents felt growth

would distance them from the communities that they represented to the point that they would lose the unique qualities that went with being led by local people for local people. Examples included the small Tenant Management Organisation which has resisted Housing department pressures to take on the management of a neighbouring estate and the community shop which refused to take over other shops in neighbouring villages. Such groups were more interested in replicating their model through sharing their ideas and expertise with others, rather than growth.

Concluding remarks

Over the last decade, therefore, a picture of the third sector has emerged which is not that there are clear distinctions community action, but differences within the third sector. Again, characterising such differences (as research participants did) as a simple voluntary organisations versus community groups is an over-simplification. For example social enterprises sought to distance themselves from charities: arts and sports groups (see Milling et al, chapter 8) argued that they constituted discreet, or distinct, sub-sectors of voluntary action.

Further, relying on collective memory to trace perceived change in voluntary and community action can be problematic. For many commentators the 2010 election marked a watershed for the third sector with the introduction of the cuts and austerity measures (Ishkanian and Szreter 2012, Milbourne 2013). As far back as 2007 the Charity Commission issued *“a wake up call to the sector and public authorities”* noting the stripping out in the sector of smaller organisations with funding of less than £100,000. Equally, predicting the future would be difficult. Reflecting back to 1945 and the introduction of the welfare state, there were those, such as Richard Crossman, who predicted the demise of charity. Yet this is not to say that below the radar groups and the third sector as a whole were undergoing profound changes:

‘I don’t want to predict what the future, say in five years, will look like for voluntary never mind community groups. There may be a leaner but more efficient and effective sector, a more entrepreneurial and business like sector – or just a leaner one. What we will see played out in some form is a profound change in the relationships between people, government and the sector.’
(Development Agency Interview).

One of those profound changes in the sector as a whole is the fragmentation of its strategic unity (Alcock 2010) – if that ever really existed.

Reflective Exercises

Consider the statement that 'Before 2010 there was a voluntary and community sector. Now there is a voluntary versus community sector'. To what extent do you agree with this?

Consider the argument: *'It's a really well established committee which has well established ways of working because the key individuals have been involved for a long time it is very difficult to come in as a new person and challenge some of those ways of working'*; Can community groups outlive their purpose and usefulness?

Reflect on the proposition that community groups are inclusive and democratic or, alternatively, autocratic and exclusive. Why are such dichotomies not particularly useful when thinking about community groups?

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